

Helios Gómez

DAYS OF IRE

**Libertarian communism,
flamenco romanes
and avant-garde realism**



Helios Gómez (Seville, 1905 – Barcelona, 1956), Sevillian, Romany gypsy and Barcelonan, participated in some of the most interesting European creative networks of his time. His work lies in a paradoxical nodule amidst apparently antithetical elements, emerging as both anachronic and ahead of its time. He was at once a realist, a populist and avant-garde, a political activist and militant advocate of Romany identity, a libertarian communist and a practitioner of flamenco, of the kind that sing and dance.

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and avant-garde realism*

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As someone both known and unknown, Helios Gómez (Seville, 1905 – Barcelona, 1956) was an artist whose career was unique. He identified himself as Sevillian, Romany gypsy and Barcelonan, and participated in some of the most interesting European creative networks of his time. His work is a paradoxical nodule amidst apparently antithetical elements, emerging as both anachronic and ahead of its time. He was at once a realist, a populist and avant-garde, a political activist and militant advocate of Romany identity, a libertarian communist and a practitioner of flamenco, of the kind that sing and dance. The relevance of the work of Helios Gómez constitutes a unique case in the European artistic panorama of his time.

A first consideration is that by claiming his Romany identity and seeking to give it a meaning that was not just cultural or ethnic, but specifically political, he was decades ahead of many of the critical reflections that come to us now through the field of postcolonial studies, where he is recognized as a point of reference in the Romany context.

Furthermore, as a popular and even populist artist, his formal avant-garde militancy is especially relevant, expressed in what he defended as realism. His was a true realism, able to transmit, visualise and express—from subordinate positions, yet with the same complexity as the science, philosophy and literature of this period—the years he so intensely lived, the society he sought to transform and the human communities he struggled alongside for emancipation.

Helios Gómez found a free and radical terrain in the avant-garde laboratory, enabling him to synthesize disparate features, including the heterodoxies he was called to live with. At the beginning he was close to Ultraism, and was later a Dada-Constructivist and then a Productivist until towards the end of the Civil War, which found him bound to surrealism. His work's resolution can be re-read today from out of this experimentation and experience, considering it from the perspective of what is known as the graphic turn. In this regard, it not only privileged the graphic arts and typography as base techniques, but also performatively developed the applications owed to older craft woodcut techniques in *agitprop*, while also exploring poster design, graphic activism, the press and public murals, amongst others, to the point, for example, of turning the *Sindicat de Dibuixants Professionals* (SDP) [Union of Professional Illustrators]

of Catalonia, an entity which he founded and directed from the start, into an artistic instrument.

His anarchist militancy also took an interesting turn. Trained in his father's Masonic socialism as well as under the tutorship of Felipe Alaiz in Seville, from where this latter headed up *Solidaridad Obrera*, the libertarian anarchist daily that had been closed down in Barcelona, he later shifted to communism, which he always would present as libertarian. Then, in the middle of the war and against the grain, he returned to his anarchist filiation, continuing after the defeat of 1939 with formulas connected to Andalusian and Romany associationism (he founded the Andalusian Centre in Barcelona), while also working avidly to give a political shape to some kind of national reconciliation.

The case of Helios Gómez is therefore exceptional, and the revision of his work as proposed here is precisely an attempt to understand his unique identity by revealing it in the cultural, social and political contexts it transited. The importance of his graphic work and the recognition of his creative style is beyond all doubt, and in many works (books, films, essays, and so on) following the Spanish Civil War his presence is overwhelming, although often without being appropriately cited. Still, what interests us here is to show his work in the context of the networks that he moved in, allied with the artists and movements he was active with, underlining the deep communitarian conviction of his activity. Early on this context meant his involvement with the Seville Ultraist movement; it continued with the Dada-Constructivists in Germany and the graphic artists union he began in the midst of the Civil War. It also featured fellow Romany gypsies, with the political shift he sought to mark his identity trait with, as well as flamenco artists (an expressive field he felt closely allied with), the proletariat and even the lumpen underclass, to the point of being able to consider him ahead of his time in what, following Mario Perniola, could be called lumpen-productivism.

With the image of the "rogue who becomes an objector", Jean Cassou deftly summed up Helios Gómez's unique way of working. The subordinate classes most Romany belonged to, which Marx called the lumpen-proletariat, resolved to have a voice of their own, calling for their own emancipation. Furthermore, Helios Gómez carried through with this process without concealing the insults proffered upon them, which ran the gamut—lazy, gamblers, folkloric, exotic, crooks. What is more, his idea was to turn these vexations into identifying markers, defending those very aspects wielded as reasons to despise them.

To be sure, in consonance with the conceptual example of Helios Gómez himself, in this exhibition we have not sought to conceal certain paternalist or stereotyped views—he was seen an entertainer,

a collaborationist or a confident—the Sevillian artist had to put up with and which, perhaps, explain why still today his work does not occupy the central place it rightly deserves in the art of his time.

Futurist, exotic and populist in nature, Helios Gómez's way of working magnificently resolves that (so highly productive) misunderstanding, which, as Fredric Jameson warned, arises between modernity and *modernismo* (art nouveau) in the cultural spheres of Spain and Latin America. As a result, perhaps, there is no other artist, from the perspective of Romany culture, who so aptly incarnates this vision of the future and revision of the past, stamping these anachronistic energies onto the political struggles of the time he was destined to live in. Helios Gómez draws his strength from forgotten pasts and imminent futures, as José Esteban Muñoz would say, and his black-on-white prints are particularly expressive of the negation of the state of things that distinguished his everyday reality.

His identity as subordinate, Romany and cosmopolitan, as well as the historical period he lived through, imposed by capitalism and carried out by fascism, led him from the freedom of European bohemia to jail, a prison-boat and a concentration camp, in constant ebb and flow. Utopia and dystopia coincide in Helios Gómez. Nomadism, exodus, exile—*black swan, dowsing of the great beyond*—his way of being, the way he lived.

0. Kursaal (1923–1929)

The Kursaal Internacional was a kind of workers' community centre and dance hall which became the focal point of modernity in Seville from the moment it opened its doors in 1914. In its upper halls various anarcho-syndicalist organizations would meet. In the main hall important concerts were programmed (featuring Manuel Torres, Ramón Montoya and La Macarrona, amongst others), and it was considered one of the main café venues for music in Spain. In its private spaces members of the artistic avant-garde had their main meeting sites: they were where they conspired and the most important Ultraist evening events were held, attended by those in the circles of the magazines *Grecia* and *Gran Guñol* at first and *Mediodía* later. Helios Gómez frequented all three parts of the building indiscriminately, and held his first important exhibition there. It was also where his friendship with Rafael Laffón began, with his contributions to the magazine *Mediodía*. He conspired there with libertarian activists linked to the publication *Solidaridad Obrera*, which had set up in Seville after its prohibition in Barcelona, and with the association of shop assistants affiliated with the CNT union and the hard core of Casa Cornelio, the bar which the civil governor ordered to be "executed" by canon fire, whose building was located on the site of the

present-day Casa de Hermandad, in the Macarena neighbourhood. At the Kursaal, the religious songs known as *saetas* were sung while stones were thrown at religious processions, as Helios Gómez exhibited his earliest futurist prints on the subject of Seville's Holy Week. It is interesting to note that, against what is commonly believed, when a young Helios Gómez left Seville, he had already acquired a thorough avant-garde education. His travels throughout Europe, including Germany and the Soviet Union, moderated his initial radicalism, adjusting it to the realism imposed by the period. That first exhibition featured three more or less differentiated bodies of work: dances, flamenco artists and musical theatre; abstract landscapes of the metropolis, that is, of Seville; and, finally, prints dedicated to the subject of social malaise.

1. *The sun disappeared* (1927–1930)

It is important to comprehend the breeding ground Helios Gómez was trained in. This would include local details, simultaneously positioning within his working method the activism of libertarian syndicalism, the cultural imagination of Romany flamenco and the negation of naturalist representation as realism, which we call avant-garde. Here Seville, an essential icon of European culture, is home to many apparent paradoxes. While a traditionalist city, it nevertheless appears as a site for early Dadaist revolts under the guidance of Francis Picabia. While a Catholic city, many of the most anti-clerical iconoclastic gestures find a place there, from Georges Batailles' *Story of the Eye* to the burning of churches. Red Seville, which the Russian revolutionaries thought would be the site of second wave European communism, ended up as the location of Queipo de Llano's coup d'état in 1936. Fredric Jameson situated the key in the misunderstanding between *modernismo* (art nouveau) and *modernity* in Spanish letters, so that Rubén Darío was followed by Tristan Tzara without being precisely the same thing. It is true that this shifting of movements and trends does occur, although that is not a good enough explanation. We also understand that architectural regionalism, for example in Aníbal González, is little more than the local version of *modernismo*, being its Art Nouveau, its Jugendstil, and so on. In effect, the same groups of workers who fervently participated in the Holy Week processions ended up setting fire to the churches. In this way we can understand how perfectly natural it is to come across the people we do, like Antonio Núñez de Herrera or Helios Gómez, or the magazine *Grecia*. It is important to understand this community potential, as built by the generation that would end up bringing the Second Republic to Spain. Rafael Laffón was a liberal Catholic who had no problem at all to be friends with a dangerous, libertine



Helios Gómez and Ira Weber in their Moscow studio, 1932–1933
The magazine *Ondas*, special edition (Madrid, 20 June 1926) *En el café cantante* [In the Cabaret], illustration for the article "Me parece que he amado en Sevilla", by Alberto Insúa, published in the magazine *Las Fiestas de Sevilla*, 1928





Días de ira, no. 1, "Iberia" (Berlin, 1930)

Somni [Dream], cover of *L'Hora. Setmanari d'avançada* (Barcelona, 1931)

L'Opinió (poster, 1930)

Félix Halle, *Wie verteidigt sich der Proletarier in politischen Strafsachen?* (Berlin, 1929)

La revolución española (Moscow, 1933)

Evacuación [Evacuation], work exhibited in the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the Paris Universal Exposition (1937). Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, deposit from Gabriel Gómez Plana, 2003

The magazine *Claridad*, no. 303 (Buenos Aires, July 1936)

J. Bladergroen, "Spanje. Een volk vecht voor zijn vrijheid", *Fundament*, no. 8 (Amsterdam, 1937)





Romany Chapel, 1948–1954, Modelo Prison, Barcelona
Helios Gómez taking up arms on the streets of Barcelona
against the coup d'état of 18 July (1936), in the magazine
Visions de Guerra i de Rereguarda, no. 1 (Barcelona, 1937)



revolutionary like Helios Gómez. This world disappeared entirely under the National-Catholic dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

2. Days of fire (1929–1932)

According to the correspondence preserved by Gabriel Gómez, son of Helios Gómez, his father was treated on two occasions by Francesc Tosquelles, at that time a young psychiatrist with ties to the BOC (Bloc Obrer i Camperol [The Block of Workers and Farmers]). In one session, Helios speaks of firing out of the windows of the dean's office at the University of Barcelona, which had been occupied to proclaim the "Republic of students, farmers and workers". On another occasion, with comrades from the POUM and the CNT, he went to Juanito el Dorado where they rehearsed flamenco songs and dances. Helios, quite likely, recited Lorca and proclaimed the relationship between popular spontaneous poetry and its analogue with revolutionary drive. Tosquelles recognized in that experience something seminal in relating "human rootedness and social experience". In *Días de ira* [Days of Ire], the folder of prints he would publish for the benefit of the AIT (International Workers' Association), Helios Gómez would present himself as a flamenco guitar player. There is no question that it is the artist's first masterwork, the perfect synthesis of the ideas he had been working on since his exhibition at the Kursaal, with the addition of the learning experience of his recent experiences with the Belgian symbolists and the Dada-Constructivists in Germany and the Soviet Union. As he was aware of the need for a populist discourse that might reach a broad audience, he redirects Constructivist formalism towards the pedagogy required by each subject. To do this, his first works were a vital tool, as they were highly anachronistic (in them he overlaid various historical periods, where Futurism and Simultanism became expressive of flamenco, bullfights or Holy Week processions). There is a logic between abstraction and narration that each print materially assumes: manual labour—in the country, on the sea—is presented in a realist manner, while mechanical work—in the factory and the city—is abstracted in a Constructivist way. The work, a graphic novel on the cycle of struggles running from the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera to the immanent proclamation of the Republic, is dedicated to *the producers!*

3. The spanish revolution (1932–1934)

La vida a la URSS. Dos anys entre bolxevics [Life in the USSR: Two Years Amongst Bolsheviks] published in chapters in *La Rambla* in 1934 (the governmental closure of the newspaper meant the entire series was not published) is an important document for understanding the thought and ideas of Helios Gómez. When the Sevillian artist

was in prison in Jaén, he received the invitation to participate in the International Conference of Proletarian Artists and in the events commemorating the October Revolution in Leningrad. This second visit to the Soviet Union was key in many respects. Most importantly it confirmed his discrepancy with Socialist Realism, which that very year became official in the USSR. It was also important in seeing how Romany culture was protected and encouraged by early socialism, with the creation of the All-Russian Gypsy Union, the newspaper *Nevo Drom*, schools for instruction in Romany language, the Romany section of the Bolshevik Party, and Romen Theatre, the only one of these institutions which survived the Stalinist repression of 1936. At various moments he suffered the censorship and repression of the communist regime, as many of his works were removed from the exhibition at the Pushkin Museum and from various publications. A number of his speeches and texts were checked over by the political police, and his partner Ira Weber, a German of Russian origin, unfortunately ended up disappearing with the Stalinist repression that swept through the country. In a certain sense, the album he produces in Russia, *La revolución española* [The Spanish Revolution], which was likely approved by the cultural police, can also be read as a reflexion of his time spent amongst the soviets (even though many of the images had been done previously in Spain). It is interesting to compare Helios' writing on his trip to Russia with *El maestro Juan Martínez que estuvo allí* [The Master Juan Martínez Who Was There], by the Sevillian journalist Manuel Chaves Nogales, also from 1934, and with *Oselito en Rusia* [Oselito in Russia], a graphic novel published by the Sevillian illustrator Andrés Martínez de León in 1936. Each of these journeys by flamenco artists to the Soviet Union were sharply differentiated.

4. *Viva october!* (1934–1936)

Upon his return to the Iberian Peninsula, Helios Gómez settled in Barcelona. Events moved quickly, with what was called the October Revolution or Revolutionary General Strike, the proclamation of the federated Catalan State in Barcelona and protests in mining regions, especially in Asturias. Helios participated actively in the Catalan resistance, was detained and then incarcerated on the ship *Uruguay*, where he did various drawings. When he was released, he travelled to Brussels, where he published *Viva Octubre! Dessins sur la Révolution Espagnole* [Viva October! Drawings on the Spanish Revolution], a report and pamphlet, in the best sense of the term, on recent events. Against the violence of current events his socialist realism shifted into expressionism, in the tradition of *España negra* by Darío de Regoyos and Émile Verhaeren, and many of his prints revive the

spirit of Goya in *The Disasters of War*. There is a certain ideological distortion, as if the revolution were uniquely communist, as indeed many prints were from his Soviet album. There is also a certain magnification of the revolt in the countryside and in Andalusia. What is interesting about these hypertrophies is how the images already envision the Civil War, which was to come two years later. Indeed, in the *agitprop* of the war these images were used in the same way in local and international media. Helios did not have a problem with his images being out of place. The priests shooting on the revolutionary masses in the drawing "Un grup d'eclesiàstics ataca a trets una manifestació obrera a Rikov, l'any 1929" [A Group of Priests Shooting a Workers' Demonstration in Rikov, 1929], which appears illustrating the Anti-Religious Museum phase in his trip to the Soviet Union, is now reproduced with a caption in French reading "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost". The book is directed against the republican bourgeois order—Arnedo, Zorita, Casas Viejas—although its later use, in the middle of the Civil War, turns it into a defence of the Second Republic. The same will occur with cases like Luis Buñuel's film *Las Hurdes, Land without Bread*, and it was not by chance that they both appeared in the propaganda film *España 1936*.

5. *Horrors of war* (1936–1939)

The coup d'état by Spanish military officials in Africa caught Helios Gómez in Barcelona, and on 19 July we know that there he was, rifle in hand, on the Via Laietana barricades. Helios accepted the military defence of the Republic as a member of the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias of Catalonia. In coherence with how his life had gone, and even with his drawings, he appeared in the Hotel Colón wearing white coveralls after having participated in an anti-clerical assault, with a red fur Pentecostal collar around his waist. The SDP union occupied the palace of the Marquès de Barberà and converted it into its headquarters, fighting with the backing of the UGT to establish a unified front with the CNT. It organised the Ramon Casanellas Column (which was meant to be a cavalry unit) with mostly Romany militia, and went off to the Aragon Front. Helios also joined as a Romany the Bayo Column, which had the idea of liberating the Balearic Islands, though failed miserably. His active participation in the conflict had its most difficult moment when, as the political commissary for the UGT-PSUC, he killed a communist captain on the Andújar Front. Details of this event have never been cleared up. Helios fled the front and found refuge in Barcelona at the SDP headquarters, knowing he was being followed by the communist political police. Without being sure of his status, when he decided to return to his political activity he did so with his anarchist comrades

from before, just as the events of May 1937 approached, when CNT and POUM members were persecuted by the communists in Barcelona. He then joined Durruti's 26th Division as a militiaman, designing, printing and distributing the division's publication *El Frente* and organizing the exhibition *Homage to Durruti* in November 1938. In the meantime, he was involved in various intellectual activities, writing texts and speeches and participating in the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Writers of Madrid and Barcelona, where he was joined by José Bergamín, although he was not able to attend the conference in Valencia due to persecution from the communists and his return to the libertarian anarchist cause.

6. *Transfixion* (1939–1956)

Helios Gómez fled Spain into France as a militiaman of the 26th Division. He was interned in the Bran concentration camp after a brief stay in Montolieu, and then moved in 1940 to the Algerian camp at Djelfa after having gone through Vernet d'Ariège, which was only for politically dangerous foreigners, and the beach camp at Argelès. The disciplinary measures were varied, so that at Montolieu they were rather lax, even allowing them to leave the camp and move about France. Helios continued drawing and did the final images of his series *Horrores de la guerra*. The drawing of the bombing of the school is a powerful example of the social and psychological destruction of the world that Helios had aspired to build. We might think of the writings of Dubuffet relating imagination and oppression, and where he gets some of his ideas for his *art brut* (Miguel Hernández and Joaquim Vicens Gironella had also been held as prisoners in French concentration camps). This process of the psychological destruction of life in the camps awakens in Helios, a survivor *par excellence*, certain mechanisms of psychological resistance associated with artistic forms of primitive resistance. Along with this went the memory of the Romany, eternal deportees, which along with surrealism would combine in one sole cauldron. Helios had met the young Salvador Dalí, who Felipe Alaiz had always defended against the attacks of other libertarians, such as Federica Montseny, and highly valued his friendship with Lorca. He had also coincided with the communist Louis Aragon in Madrid, Barcelona and Moscow, and even when he went with a commission of intellectuals to the Bran camp. When Helios meets Rafael Lafuente, the author of *Los gitanos, el flamenco y los flamencos* [The Romany, Flamenco and Flamenco Artists], this latter offers him his theories: "The surrealist declarations of Aragon could be the preamble of a Flamenco Manifesto or a Declaration of the Rights of the Romany." Helios leaves Algeria with a safe passage document from the Spanish authorities. He trustingly returns to

Seville and settles in the family home in the city, where he returns to work. Soon, however, charges and arrests follow, and he goes back to Barcelona, where his work is a blend of survival and subsistence along with superrealism and surrealism. Oneiric art, which is more or less tolerated by the regime, was also a way to defend oneself from the hostilities of life and from political enemies.

7. *Romany chapel* (1947–1954)

Helios Gómez spent eight years in the Model Prison in Barcelona, from 1947 to 1954, after a rather nebulous sentence, and after having been confirmed that the sentence had not been confirmed, so that his incarceration was illegal even under Francoist law. He spent his time reading and drawing, and teaching both these skills to other inmates. Father Lahoz commissioned him the design of a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy for the Redemption of Sentences by Labour. Helios accepted the commission, although not without contradictions. The work would become a manifesto to Romany culture. Listening to the "Moorish" song *Angelitos negros*, a huge success in Spain from 1947 onwards thanks to the version by Afro-Cuban singer Antonio Machín, he decides to make fellow Romany gypsies the main characters of the paintings, so that along with the angels the Virgin Mary and Jesus are also Romany. The success of the song was thus an alibi which helped legitimate the operation. It should be recalled that Helios had enjoyed his visit to the Anti-Religious Museum in Moscow, and in Barcelona had assaulted churches, but was now painting a Catholic chapel. Referring to the texts of Richard Wright in *Pagan Spain* (the Afro-American writer had visited Barcelona in 1954), amidst popular Catholicism one could find authentic paganism, and the culture of Romany gypsies, flamenco artists and bullfighting was proof of this. Furthermore, Helios got his revenge on the subject of "work", where every imaginable bias had been heard regarding the laziness of the Romany and their supposed punishment for it. The Romany who are prostrate (featuring the images of a number of fellow prisoners) before Our Lady of Mercy, here converted into a kind of Saint Sarah with accentuated East Indian facial features, take us through the entire history of the enslavement and persecution of the Rom up to the *porrajmos* themselves, the death camps where the Nazis assassinated 500,000 Romany. It is clear we are dealing with Helios' own experience of the concentration camps and the assumption of his condition of exile into what would be his "interior exile". What Helios does is transfer this concept of the Romany's interior exile and from there explain the way in which they assimilate the hegemonic cultural forms of the countries they settle in. The pagan flamenco festival the angels incite would be one such example.

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